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"Joy for all people, for all times" : A sermon for Augustana College's "Joy of Christmas" service

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The Joy of Christmas Past and Present

*Augustana Lutheran Church and Jenny Lind Chapel
Andover, IL*



Prelude

*Adestes Fideles
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*

Choral Call to Worship

Hodie Christus Natus Est Audrey Snyder Moira Dunn, *conductor*

Sung in Latin. Translation:
*Today Christ is born. Today the Savior has appeared.
Today the angels sing, the archangels rejoice!*

Welcome Pastor Reed Pedersen, Augustana Lutheran Church

(stand)
Hymn *Love Has Come* Red Book, #292

Prayer Pastor Richard Priggie, Chaplain, Augustana College

(sit)
Anthems
On This Day Earth Shall Ring, Neil Harmon
Amber Mraz, conductor/Rami Halabi, flute

How Far Is It To Bethlehem arr. Robert Shaw/Alice Parker
Emma Wagner, conductor

The Christmas Story in Swedish Luke 2:1-20
Read by Amanda Schar

Hymn *I Am so Glad Each Christmas Eve* Red Book, #271

The Christmas Story in Vietnamese Luke 2:1-20
Read by Aileen Phung Nguyen

Anthem
The Apple Tree David Brunner Christine Rogers, conductor

The Christmas Story in English Luke 2:1-20
Read by Karsten Zielinski

(stand)
Hymn *My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness* Red Book, #251

(sit)
Sermon *Joy for all people, for all times* Dr. Mark Safstrom

Anthem *There Is No Rose Of Such Virtue* Stephen Caracciolo
Katie Griswold, conductor
Zoë Haenisch and Carrie Ostergard, soloists

Offering *Tonight's offering supports the ministry of Jenny Lind Chapel*
Silent Night, Holy Night

(stand)
Hymn *Away in a Manger* Red Book, #278

Words of Institution Pastor Richard Priggie

Lord's Prayer

Procession to Jenny Lind Chapel *Please allow the worship leaders and the Choir to leave first, then follow, singing "Oh Come, All Ye Faithful" (carol booklet). In the Chapel, continue caroling with the Choir. All who seek the healing love that Christ offers in his body and blood are welcome to receive Holy Communion, which is "by intinction" this evening. Form a line to the altar. Receive the bread with open hands and then dip the bread in the wine. Stay and sing as long as you wish. Then go back to the "New Church" fellowship hall for Christmas goodies. An announcement will be made when the buses are ready to leave for the College.*

2018 is the **48th year** for *The Joy of Christmas Past and Present*, sponsored by Augustana College Campus Ministries and Augustana Lutheran Church, Andover.

Tonight's homilist, **Dr. Mark Safstrom**, is Assistant Professor of Scandinavian Studies at Augustana College.

Note that the unadorned **Christmas tree** in the Chancel of Jenny Lind Chapel is as it would have been when the Chapel was first used in the 1850s.

Augustana Choir

Jon Hurty & Michael Zemek, Faculty Mentors

Sheila Doak, Accompanist

Olivia Albrecht, Allison Anstead, Teydy Barber, Tyler Berger, Andrew Bradshaw, Shannon Conniff, Amy Croft, Moira Dunn, Tom Foster, Katie Griswold, Zoë Haenisch, Rami Halabi, Emily Keiner, Grace Kim, Paige Knoll, Stephen Lewis, Jordan Mar, Nathan Maras, Sabrina Massa, Hope Miner, Amber Mraz, Zach Myatt, Siena Oliveri, Carrie Ostergard, Jared Pector, Elliott Peterson, Alivia Phelps, Ariela Policastro, Matthew Postma, Christine Rogers, Bobby Rowe, Michael Tarchala, Megan Wagenknecht, Sam Wagner, AJ Weber, Dana Wojciechowski

Augustana Trombone ensemble *Dr. Samantha Keehn, Director*

Lucus Case, Adam Donovan, Lily Ford, Bethany Hobart, Luke McMillan, Carmela Russell, Anthony Roldan, Ashley Shropshire, Gina Superczynski, Eric Tabaka, Danny Tenorio

Organist Chris Nelson

Readers Amanda Schar, Aileen Phung Nguyen, Karsten Zielinski

Communion Assistants Austynn Eubank, Shannon Walsh

Sacristans Taylor Ashby, Megan Hoppe, Megan Lundblad, Allison Mikyska



THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS PAST AND PRESENT

Wednesday, December 5, 2018

Augustana College

“JOY FOR ALL PEOPLE, FOR ALL TIMES”

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2018

AUGUSTANA LUTHERAN CHURCH, ANDOVER, ILLINOIS

PROF. MARK SAFSTROM, AUGUSTANA COLLEGE

Good evening and Merry Christmas!

Please join me in prayer.

May the words of my mouth

and the meditations of all our hearts

Bring you JOY, O, God

Our Rock, and Our Redeemer.

Amen.

This passage we’ve now heard from Luke’s gospel [Luke 2] is one of the most famous from Scripture. Even those who have never cracked open a Bible will likely recognize the scene painted here. Tradition has filled in between the lines to create a standard image, the “manger scene” or nativity. This is usually a crude stable, or perhaps a grotto, with the infant Christ lying in a manger, surrounded by the Virgin Mary, always resplendent in blue, along with Joseph, both of them in full adoration poses, as well as the donkey they rode in on, one cow, several sheep and their shepherds, and curiously enough, those wise men ... who won’t be arriving for another year or so.

This delightful image is among the most replicated in human history, appearing in everything from altar paintings and stained glass, to children’s board books, to U.S. postage stamps of the Madonna and Child by various masters, to plastic light-up decorations for the yard, or even to the full-sized outdoor variety, like the one that Kevin McCallister hides in in the classic 1990s Christmas film, “Home Alone.”

When my mom was little, she was cast in a live outdoor nativity, where children dressed up to act out the story at set showtimes. People could drive up in their cars and watch the action unfold. Leave it to the 1950s to invent the drive-in nativity. My mom’s job was to play an angel, who popped out from behind a rock with two other little girls, in their rain-

proof angel costumes, at the point when a booming voice said, “and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host!”

Three little girls is all they got. The nativity is often a cute image.

One downside to its omnipresence is that it can easily become kitsch. That is to say, mass-produced art that is designed to have popular appeal, but has no depth of meaning.

Or that it is so familiar that we miss the meaning that it does have.

This image, furthermore, can also be contentious, and in American society since the middle of the last century, it has increasingly been removed from public holiday displays.

This is one of the reasons for the enduring popularity of the 1965 TV special, “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” It struck a chord precisely for its divergence from superficial references to Christmas in other programming. In his biography of the cartoonist, Charles Schulz, author Stephen Lind explains the context and significance of Schulz’s inclusion of that scene where Linus reads from the Gospel of Luke. The TV executives were opposed and wanted it cut, but eventually conceded to Schulz’s insistence that his artistic vision not be hampered.

At the time – and this still remains true – most holiday specials only had five main aesthetic or thematic elements, and were only vaguely connected to the Christmas story from Luke. These were:

- 1) the iconic Christmas tree,
- 2) some kind of Scrooge character,
- 3) the use of carols in the background,
- 4) the presence of Santa, and
- 5) an emphasis on a universal, but vague “spirit of Christmas.”

Schulz wanted to keep in the reference to Luke 2, for its own merit, as well as to underscore Charlie Brown’s concerns about the commercialization of the holiday.

Stephen Lind explains:

“The studio executives...worried about their market share. [...] Their concerns were products of an industry that would routinely underestimate the collective interest the country would have in spiritual faith. In the broadcast business, [...] it had become too dangerous for sustained religious reference, and network executives were not usually keen on embracing danger.”

Nevertheless, with Schulz adamant, and the program already advertised, the executives decided that a flop was better than the losses sustained by pulling a program from the air.

HALF of all American televisions that were turned on, on Dec. 9, 1965, were tuned in to “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” The response was overwhelming, and the program won an Emmy the following year.

There is much at stake in the way that Christmas can be depicted and celebrated publicly. The concerns often have to do with fear.

Fear of cultural confrontation in a pluralized, secular society is certainly a valid fear, and worth mitigating.

It seems that the TV executives, however, were worried about the bottom line, and in this regard, their fears resembled more those of King Herod two millennia ago.

Why would a proxy ruler of the Roman emperor be afraid of a baby, born to a teenage girl, dutifully traveling to Bethlehem to be taxed, even though she is pregnant, who later becomes a refugee and an immigrant, fleeing to Egypt? Surely these poor tax payers are the weakest people in the empire and no one to fear.

Nevertheless, when the angel says “Do not be afraid” there is good reason to fear this baby. We have some indication already of who it is who should be afraid. Mary tells us herself just prior in the first chapter of Luke, in the song that she sings during her visit to her cousin Elizabeth. This is a song of praise, known as the Magnificat, and serves as the basis for numerous classical music pieces and hymns like the one we’ve just sung [Red Book no. 251, “My Soul Proclaims Your Greatness”].

“My soul doth magnify the Lord...” it begins in the Old English of the King James Bible.

To “magnify” the Lord, is to “proclaim the greatness of the Lord.” When I was little I remember picturing Mary like a human magnifying glass. Maybe that isn’t so far from the truth. Her joyful song magnifies what God has done and will do. This is a breakthrough moment for her as she jubilantly claims the promises of God. Her mind is changed, her fears are lifted. What was unclear, is clear.

Her rejoicing is all the more dramatic because she understands what is at stake, and the gravity of God’s desire for justice.

From Mary’s song we learn that God “has scattered the proud” and “has brought down rulers from their thrones” and “sent the rich away empty.”

Maybe Mary is a bit of a rabble rouser after all.

Fear prompts King Herod later to try to hunt down the Christ child, and in the process, slaughter all the boys who are 2 years old and younger, just to be thorough. Herod is a proud, rich, ruler.

Yet, from Mary's song we also learn that God's "mercy extends to those who fear him."

In this sense the fear of the Lord is a holy reverence. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom" – we hear in the Psalms, for instance. Mary's song confidently proclaims that God favors the humble and "fills the hungry with good things."

So, the nativity isn't kitsch after all. It is a high-stakes proclamation of God's love for God's people, that runs counter to the ways of the rulers of this world, television executives, as well as government officials and presidents. God's people, as explained in the Magnificat, are those who fear the Lord, are humble, and hungry. It is the poor and marginalized for whom the news of the birth of Jesus is truly good news. They are in a position to receive it.

Yet, good news isn't really good, unless it is good for everyone.

The angel goes further than Mary does. "Do not be afraid, I bring you tidings of great joy which shall be for all people."

ALL PEOPLE. Not just those who are willing to give intellectual assent to this idea, or be converted to a certain camp or movement.

The words of the angel are stark. This is joy for all people.

God's favor rests on the humble and the hungry. The downtrodden, those who have no hope, the poor in spirit and those who are literally poor, the peacemakers, the lepers, the blind, the lame, prostitutes, fishermen, and tax collectors. These are the people who Christ kept company with, after all.

The concerns of Mary's song are echoed later in Luke chapter 6, where Jesus says:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
 for yours is the kingdom of God.
 Blessed are you who hunger now,
 for you will be satisfied.
 Blessed are you who weep now,
 for you will laugh.
 Blessed are you when people hate you,
 when they exclude you and insult you

and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.”

The beautiful thing about Scripture is something that is true about good literature in general. There are repeated themes that tie it all together and give coherence to the diverse stories, authors, and historical time periods.

Luke has thematically aligned the good news of Mary’s pregnancy and the birth of Jesus, with the prophecies about the Messiah from the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the later life and words of Jesus.

Mary’s song is also a repetition of the song sung hundreds of years earlier, by Hannah, the mother of Samuel, as she dedicated her son to service in the temple. The very same themes are here: God exalts the humble, and humbles the exalted.

When the angel announces: “Do not be afraid” to the shepherds in the field, this is a message that has been repeated dozens of times throughout Scripture, by angels, the voice of God, and the leaders of God’s people, and even insignificant characters.

In Genesis, the Lord tells Abram several times “Do not be afraid” as he is being called as the father of many nations (15:1, 26:24).

God comes to Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, after they are driven away into the wilderness, saying “Do not be afraid” (21:17).

As Rachel is dying in childbirth, the midwife says to her “Do not be afraid” – for her child has been born and the promise will continue after her death (35:17).

Moses tells the people of Israel not to be afraid.

Joseph tells the people not to be afraid.

And this goes on and on right down to the moment that the Angel Gabriel tells Mary “Do not be afraid” when announcing that she will give birth to Jesus.

Luke begins his gospel by addressing it to “Theophilus,” whose name can mean “befriended by God.” There is speculation about who this person may have been. One intriguing theory is that we, the reader, are actually Theophilus, the one “befriended by God.” It is an interpretation that certainly works thematically, and aligns with the greeting being

given to Mary, as well as the shepherds, Joseph, and Zechariah and Elizabeth. All of these people are told to “not be afraid,” as they are being befriended by God.

Those of us who teach literature remind our students that if something is repeated, it must be significant. If it is repeated multiple times, then – “reader, pay attention”! This is not a coincidence.

This almost rhythmic repetition of “Do not be afraid” throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament should wash over us like a wave of reassurance.

As readers, we are addressed as the friends of God.

This is good news.

Yet, good news isn’t really good news, unless it is good for everyone. So there must be a way that even for King Herod, this initially bad news might have become good news, if only he had been able to receive it as such.

Herod did not hear this message, as the baby undermined his earthly security and privilege too much, and he responded as insecure tyrants and other malignant narcissists have done for millennia.

Or maybe Herod did understand the message. That he was the target of Mary’s subversive song, as well as generations of criticism from the prophets of Israel.

The voice of God in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament is strikingly consistent on this point. The bows of the warriors are broken, those who have food go hungry. The weak, on the other hand, are restored, and the hungry are fed.

This is a transformative message of hope and joy.

If we are to be encouraged and even changed by the reading of the Christmas gospel, the change lies in the realization that the text has something to say to me, in my situation, now.

Am I arrogant? Am I privileged? Do I feel threatened by the upending of the social order? Do I fear something is being taken away from me?

The political climate of the past few years has played on our fears. Fears about changes in society, fears about immigrants and refugees, fears about ... you fill in the blank.

What are you afraid of?

The Christmas gospel is repeating a joyful message about not being afraid.

This is good news.

In the corner of the Lutheran tradition that nurtured my own faith so profoundly, the Pietists in the Church of Sweden, the reading of Scripture and preaching was often oriented to the reader. The text was the mirror for self-discovery and transformation.

Questions included: What does this text teach, what does it command, and what does it promise?

Our text today presents profound claims about the truth, not kitsch. Hannah's song and Mary's song are deep words worth pondering in our hearts.

After the singing of the angels, how can we enter the world without fear, to love mercy, and to do justice?

Perhaps mercy and justice are not threatening to you, but the Bible is. There are good reasons for that, I am sure.

All I can do is repeat the words of angels: Do not be afraid.

In many Christian traditions, there is an understanding that the spirit of God illuminates our reading of Scripture. When we hear the Word and understand it and are transformed, this is the work of God's Spirit.

What a gift to have our minds changed! To have our fears and prejudices lifted away!

One of the historical figures that has been formative in my own deep relationship to the Bible is an immigrant schoolman named David Nyvall. In the middle of debates about scriptural interpretation in the 1890s, he responded:

"Without the Spirit of God the Bible is like a sheath without a sword, like a grain of seed without a sprout. Without the Spirit, the very essence is missing, and the Bible becomes a casket for dead dogmas instead of a garden of life and fragrance."

Opening the Bible is an act of entering into a beautiful world, of encountering God and God's promises. Yes, there is much at stake. But the message is, do not be afraid.

The Bible is not a casket, Nyvall said.

Martin Luther referred to the Bible as "the cradle wherein Christ is laid."

The straw is coarse. This is a crude feeding trough for livestock. This is no place for a baby.

And yet this is precisely where a message of hope and joy is needed.

In the TV special, Charlie Brown is exasperated because Christmas can seem so crass and shallow and kitschy.

“I guess I don’t know what Christmas is all about. Isn’t there anyone – who knows what Christmas is all about?!” he cries.

This is when Linus replies by reciting the passage from Luke 2, from memory. This is the best place to look. I suggest we also read backwards and forwards from this point, particularly taking Mary’s words into account. What did Christmas mean for Mary?

Of the many Christmases that I have celebrated so far, some have been more joyful than others. The context of our lives shapes how we relate to the meaning of this annual festival.

At present, our country and our world are not in great shape. This is not the kinder, gentler nation we had hoped it would be. Yet in many respects, our days resemble the turbulent 1960s, and maybe even Palestine two millennia ago.

Despite being young, Mary was a deep thinker. Luke’s gospel tells us that after the visit of the shepherds, she “pondered these things in her heart.” The Magnificat demonstrates that she was passionate about justice, understood her own vulnerability and weakness, and rejoiced at the news that it is precisely the vulnerable and weak whom God befriends. This is her song:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
 he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

This is good news, for all people for all times.

Do not be afraid.

In the name of the Father,

the Son,

and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.